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AUTHOR Allison, Derek J.; Allison, Patricia A.
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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study investigating and comparing differences in problem-solving approaches between novice and expert elementary school principals are reported in this paper, which focuses on the interview phase of the data collection process. Interview questions were designed to explore and compare the ways in which principals perceived administrative problems. Three groups of 8 principals classified by experience level--rookie, seasoned, and veteran--were interviewed, a total of 24 participants. Twenty different administrative problems were identified, which were categorized as routine administrative procedures, walk-in student/teacher/parent concerns, other walk-in problems, and long-range projects. No significant relationship was found between level of experience and perceptions of problem solving. The more effective problem solvers were more involved in large-scale school projects, suggesting that the ability to detect need and transform problems into projects is an administrative asset. Three tables and two figures are included. (2 references) (LMI)

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STUDENTS, TEACHERS, PARENTS AND PROJECTS: PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PROBLEMS

Derek J. Allison

The University of Western Ontario

Patricia A. Allison

The University of Western Ontario

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The findings presented in this paper are based on an analysis of interviews conducted with 24 elementary school principals employed by six public school boards in Southwestern Ontario. As described in more detail in the introductory paper, these interviews were part of a larger investigation of principal problem-solving involving 42 participants recruited in five experience categories. The interviews were conducted with 32 participants in four different categories of experience. By definition, however, none of the participants in the Aspirant group were principals and as this paper is concerned with principal perceptions, those interviews--which were also conducted using a modified protocol--were not considered. The 24 principals were evenly distributed across the remaining three experience categories such that the eight members of the "Rookie" group had all been principals for less than four years, the eight members of the "Seasoned" group all had between 10 and 16 years of experience as principals, and the remaining eight "Veterans" had all served as principals for at least 20 years. Taken together, the 24 interviewees represented a cumulative total of 313 years of experience in the principal's office.

Each of the 24 principals was interviewed privately by a member of our research team, interviews lasting between 1½ and 3 hours. All interviews were held in seminar rooms at Althouse College, the building which houses the Faculty of Education of the University of Western Ontario, where we were free from interruptions and disturbances. Researchers took written notes summarizing responses to the interview questions, and tape-recordings were also made for more detailed analysis. The interviews formed the final stage of the day-long data collection process, which served to pre-focus the attention of respondents on the questions and topics addressed during the interview. Our observations during the course of data collection lead us to believe that experiences shared by researchers and participants during the morning sessions markedly lowered interviewee anxieties

and helped create a comfortable and trusting relationship between researchers and participants.

This paper is based on an analysis of researcher notes taken in response to interview questions designed to probe how principals perceive problems encountered in the course of their work. Occasional reference was made to the interview recordings to clarify points as required. The main objective of the analysis was to build a descriptive picture of how principals perceive problems, but attention was also given to identifying any notable differences associated with experience or rated problem solving ability. In the first case, interview responses were compared on the basis of membership in the three experience categories described above. Possible differences in the perceptions of more and less able problem solvers were examined by comparing responses from the five principals who received the highest and the five who received the lowest mean ratings for their solutions to the Miss MacDonald problem. As described more fully in the accompanying papers, three external judges rated the quality of the actions proposed by participants in the course of their think-aloud analyses of this problem, and those ratings were then averaged to obtain a mean "quality of proposed actions" score. Unfortunately, equipment failure resulted in the loss of data for three think-aloud sessions, all of which involved principals. Consequently, the comparisons between the highest or lowest rated principals considered only 21 interviews.

The results of the analysis are presented under two main headings. The first reports participant responses to a predetermined inventory of different kinds of problems. Responses to questions designed to identify typical, particularly difficult and satisfying problems are considered in the second section.

Frequency, importance and difficulty attached to different types of problems.

Toward the end of the interview, participants were handed the list of 14 problem categories that appears at the centre of Figures 1-3. They were then asked to use the list to identify the types of problems they encountered most and least frequently, and those which they saw as the most routine, the most difficult, the most time consuming and the most important. The list of problem categories was taken directly from a previous study by Leithwood, Cousins and Smith (1989, p. 6). In that study, the researchers interviewed 11 elementary and 10 secondary principals and vice-principals "approximately monthly" in order to identify specific problems encountered over the course of a single school year (p. 3). A total of 907 discrete problems were identified which were then classified in 16 emergent categories. We considered two of the categories in the original Leithwood et al. list ("Principal" and "System Partners") to be less than fully self-explanatory and for this reason--and because they were accorded only minor importance in the original study--they were eliminated from our list in order to avoid possible confusion during the interviews. Except for the exclusion of those two categories, our list was identical to that generated by Leithwood et al..

Figures 1, 2, and 3 chart the frequency with which each of our principals identified the problem categories when responding to the questions shown above each panel of the chart. The frequency bars shown in the charts are based on percentages (rounded to the nearest whole number) so as to facilitate comparisons, with the total number of responses to each question being shown at the top of the appropriate panel (n=x).

The number of raw responses varies between the panels for two reasons. The chart for the most frequently encountered type of problem actually combines

responses to two interview questions (most frequently and next most frequently encountered problem). Despite the exclusionary phrasing of these questions, many respondents chose not to identify a single category, or offered a qualifying comment which encompassed another categories. In six instances, principals actually named two problem categories when identifying their most frequently encountered kind of problem. In other instances respondents made an explicit link between their most and next most frequently encountered problems. One illustrative example of this was provided by a principal who, after identifying the student category for his[1] most frequently encountered type of problem and parents as his next, explained that "most of these, of course, are the parents of the students who cause problems". Consequently, the responses to these questions were collapsed so as to better represent the high degree of interdependence evident in the answers.

Multiple responses also account for variations in the base numbers represented in the remaining charts. The question asking respondents to identify the type of problem they considered to be most important produced notably more multiple responses than any other. Thirteen of our 24 principals offered answers which conformed to what could be called the "STP syndrome", in which the Student, Teacher or Parent categories were linked together in some way. Six responses were "pure STP" in that they linked students, teachers and parents together, five linked students and teachers and two students and parents. None explicitly linked teachers and parents.

The charts warrant some discussion. Figure 1 shows a logical asymmetry between the most and least frequently encountered problems identified by interviewees. Students (42%), Teachers (25%), Parents (11%) and School Routines (11%) were identified as the most frequently encountered types of problems, reflecting, on one hand the "STP syndrome" noted above and, on the other, a logical

concern with the management of everyday operations through organizational and other routines. The four least frequently encountered kinds of problems were identified as those involving the Ministry (34%), Trustees (20%), Other Principals (14%) and Outside Agencies (11%). In the case of trustees, one of our experienced principals spontaneously commented that he had only had "five calls in fifteen years". The Community at large, school Plant, Senior Administrators and Special Events did not emerge as either frequent or infrequent sources of problems.

The Leithwood et al. data revealed a similar pattern, although in that study problems involving students were identified markedly less frequently (13%). This discrepancy is probably best attributed to differences in method. The Leithwood et al. data had a firmer empirical base than the data dealt with here, which was derived entirely from self-report responses. At the same time our respondents placed their own interpretations on the categories, and this undoubtedly resulted in some discrepancies between the two data sets. In the Leithwood et al. paper, for example, "Conflicts Between Teachers / Students / Administration" were classified in the teacher category (p. 4), but, judging from comments made during the course of the interviews and bearing in mind the options available to our principals, many may have quite reasonably thought of such problems as falling into the Student category. This raises--as does the STP syndrome--important questions about the "tidiness" of problems that involve a number of interrelated actors and interests, and the inherent difficulties which this poses when attempting to assign "real-world" problems to a set of simplifying categories, a concern which will be returned to often as this paper develops.

Figure 2 shows and compares the problem categories which were identified by our principals as the most time consuming and the most important. These charts show a marked and logical symmetry, problem types identified as most important also

being those identified as the most time consuming. The predominance of the STP response is particularly marked: six principals, as noted above, answered "Students-Teachers-Parents" when asked to identify the kind of problem to which they attached the most importance. Some respondents qualified this by also saying "in that order", and others took pains to point out the pre-eminent importance of student problems. Figure 2 also illustrates another facet of the inherent difficulty of attempting to reduce the full spectrum of problems encountered in school administration to a finite list of categories: one of our principals preferred to identify "curriculum" as the most important type of problem encountered, rather than any of the categories contained in the list. The Leithwood et al. study classified "Curriculum Review, Development, Implementation" ("CRDI" in Ontario Edlish) within the Teacher problem category (p. 4), but the principal who elected to identify curriculum as a separate problem category clearly saw things differently--and there are solid theoretical and policy grounds supporting his view. This raises the question of how frequently "curriculum" might have been identified in our interviews if this option had been included in our list of problem categories.

Figure 3 charts the problem categories identified as most difficult and most routine. The STP pattern is again clearly evident in the kinds of problem identified as being most difficult, but this time, interestingly, the Parent category predominates. This is mainly attributable to the responses from principals in our Seasoned experience category, seven out of eight principals in that group identifying Parents in response to this question. In contrast, only two of our eight Veterans identified the Parent category as responsible for their most difficult problems, while half of our Rookies gave such a response. One of these Rookies also identified the Student category in response to this question, as did three of the remaining Rookies, while only one Seasoned and one Veteran principal chose the

Student category as representing their most difficult problems. Four of our eight Veteran principals selected the Teacher category for their most difficult kind of problem, a choice that was only made by two members of the Rookie group and one in the Seasoned group.

School Routines (42%) and Plant (17%) were most frequently identified as providing the most routine kinds of problems. In this case there were no notable experience related patterns in the data, with the exception that all eight of the Veterans identified School Routines as the category representing their most routine kind of problem; six members of the Rookie group, but only three of the Seasoned group, chose this category. The most interesting aspect here, however, is the inconsistency between our findings and those reported from the Leithwood et al. study. In that study the researchers were primarily concerned with identifying non-routine problems, and those which were not identified as such by the principals concerned were classified as routine by default, as it were. The report of the Leithwood study identified the Teacher category as accounting for the largest proportion (23%) of routine problems encountered by the elementary principals involved, with School Routines (21%) and then Parents (15%) constituting the next most frequently encountered problem categories. The predominance of the School Routine response in our data could be partly attributable to the similarity in wording between the question asked and that response, but our finding that principals view school routines as routine is not in itself inconsistent with the Leithwood et al. results, although the magnitude of the response appears to be.

The interesting inconsistency lies in the fact that only one of our principals identified the Teacher category as a source of routine problems, whereas this category accounted for the majority of the routine problems identified in the Leithwood et al. study. Moreover, the single response in our data explicitly linked

teachers to students and the respondent also identified two other categories in his answer, the verbatim response being, "students and teachers, school routines and plant". This inconsistency again illustrates the difficulty of accurately and reliably classifying problems, but it also raises the question of what constitutes a "real" problem and points to the further difficulty of reliably and meaningfully distinguishing between routine and non-routine problems. Obviously principals do deal with routine matters concerning teachers, and some of these will require decisions and pose problems. Teacher absence reports and other kinds of payroll data must be prepared (or the preparation of such must at least be supervised), teacher absences must be covered, substitute teachers found, staff meetings arranged and so on and so forth. Our principals, however, did not apparently view such routine activities as constituting "problems" involving teachers, presumably perceiving them simply as routines. This does not imply, of course, that our principals saw teachers as non-problematic elements in school administration; quite the contrary, as is made clear from the other charts presented here. The point is simply that the problems that teachers pose for principals--as opposed to administrative work involving teachers--were not seen as routine by the principals we interviewed, a finding which, when expressed this way, is reassuring.

The converse of this point concerns what actually constitutes school routines in the perceptions of principals. The School Routine category was generated in the original Leithwood et al. study in order to accommodate problems associated with attendance, budget, fire drills, registration, timetabling and so forth (p. 5). But are such problems necessarily routine? Presumably not always; indeed, three of the problems identified by secondary (but none by elementary) principals in the Leithwood et al. study were classified as "non-routine School Routine" problems (p. 6). Apart from the obvious semantic difficulty here, this phrasing highlights the

difficulty of distinguishing routine from non-routine problems. As reviewed in more detail in the accompanying introductory paper, the literature suggests that a key distinction involves the differences between well-structured and ill-structured problems. Further, the literature suggests that expert practitioners are more likely to be able to accurately distinguish "true" non-routine from routine problems in ambiguous situations, this being a logically crucial diagnostic step in expert problem-solving. There would seem to be much potentially profitable work to be done in this respect, particularly with regard to probing the ways in which principals (and other administrators) identify and distinguish between routine and non-routine--and between different kinds of routine--problems.

The data considered here are not sufficiently fine-grained to explore questions of this kind, although a close examination of the interview transcripts may yield some useful insights in the future. Nonetheless, no differences were detected between the problem categories identified as most routine by the principals scoring highest and lowest on the measure of problem solving ability derived from the think-aloud transcripts. Nor were any such differences noted with regard to the other responses summarized in Figures 1, 2 and 3. The only noteworthy differences related to experience have already been mentioned.

Actual problems identified by principals

Earlier in the interview, our principals were asked to describe a specific problem that they had dealt with recently. In subsequent questions they were also asked to identify the most difficult problem that they had encountered and then the most satisfying solution to a problem that they had experienced. Tables 1, 2 & 3 offer capsule descriptions of the responses obtained to these questions classified under various headings. These lists of problems will be treated here as an opportunity sample of the "real-life" problems encountered by principals in their

everyday work. The list cannot and should not be taken as a representative survey of administrative problems: the size of the "sample" is far too small, given the potential universe of problems involved. Respondents were free to define criteria such as "specific" and "recent" as they saw fit, and they presumably selected their problems according to other unknown criteria. Even so, the problems identified in the Tables offer a number of interesting points for discussion.

Typical problems

Table 1 presents capsule descriptions of responses to the question asking principals to describe a recently encountered problem. These problems have been divided into those which primarily involve students and/or teachers and/or parents--problems of the kind we are terming STP problems--and others. As would reasonably be expected, there were no obvious or otherwise marked differences between the kinds of problems identified by more or less experienced principals. Nor was any relationship apparent between the problems identified and the problem solving ratings derived from the think-aloud analysis. One notable feature highlighted by this Table, however, is that almost two-thirds of the problems volunteered by principals in response to this question were "STP" problems of one kind of another, that is problems involving students and/or teachers and/or parents. That these kinds of problems should predominate is consistent with the previously discussed results regarding the most frequently encountered problems, and is also consistent with a principal's broad responsibility for supervising the instructional activities that comprise the core technology of schools.

The problems listed in Table 1 also illustrate the difficulties involved in classifying administrative problems. Despite the coarseness of the STP and Other categories used to classify these problems, one might argue that some problems are mis-classified, or that some other category system would be more appropriate. The

yard duty schedule and the discipline policy problems, for example, might arguably be considered as problems involving students and teachers, while problem #13 could be treated as a school health problem, or perhaps even a legal problem. Indeed, this problem provides a fine example of the classification difficulties that can be encountered. As described in the interview, the actual problem revolved around a donation of freshly pressed apple-juice from an orchard-owning parent. The parent in question had been donating the juice as a Fall treat for the students over a number of years and other parents were apparently either satisfied with, or unaware of, this tradition. The practice became a problem when a newly appointed superintendent, who had previously worked in an urban environment, became concerned about possible legal repercussions if the juice had not been tested and approved by the health department and some students became ill. The specific details of this problem make it more than a little unusual, but some of the generic elements could be expected to be more common. Yet it is by no means immediately clear how this or generically similar problems would be best classified according to the categories discussed in relation to Figures 1-3, or, indeed, any other brief but intendedly comprehensive problem typology.

The problems listed in Table 1 also illustrate the implicit interdependence between the three definitional elements of STP problems as well as the wide ranges of scope and difficulty that can be associated with problems encountered by principals. Regardless of the major aspect of the STP problems emphasised by the capsule accounts in Table 1, any resolution or attempted resolution of these problem would seem to automatically involve one of both of the remaining elements. Problem #1, for example, the "serious student discipline problem", was described in the interview as involving a group of older students who were consistently disrupting classes. Thus, this problem implicitly involved not just the problem students, but

the other students and the teachers of the classes concerned, while any attempted resolution would almost certainly involve the parents of the problem students. Similar interconnections could be plausibly imagined between all--or at least almost all--of the other STP problems listed in Table 1. Perhaps the most clear-cut STP problem in this list would be #14, the "routine student discipline problem", but even problems of this kind will likely involve a teacher or teachers, and could result in parental involvement.

Similar observations might be made about the problems listed under the "Other" heading, but none of these problems initially involved a student, teacher or parent focus, any involvement of these members of the school community being dependent on the solution developed by the principal or the manner in which he or she might decide to seek a solution. This distinction is further highlighted by the way which the STP and other problems came to the attention of the principals concerned, a point which was specifically addressed in the interviews. In the words of two of our principals, all but one of the STP problem were "walk-in" problems, that is to say they all "walked into the office". In some cases these problems actually came to the attention of principals through a telephone call or as a result of a corridor encounter, but these were still "walk-in" problems in that the specific problem was first brought to the attention of a previously unaware principal by someone else who was, more often than not, a student, teacher or parent. The only STP problem that was clearly not of the walk-in variety was problem #7, the principal's concern over this teacher being rooted in his own observations.

Of the "Other" problems, only problem #17, the "absent crossing guard", was a clear-cut walk-in problem, but, while this problem involved students, parents and teachers at a second or third level of relatedness, the focus was the absent crossing guard and what had to be done to deal with that. More to the point, all of the

remaining "Other" problems were not of the walk-in variety, but were problems that were defined or otherwise identified by the principals concerned, or which stemmed from an externally initiated change in policy or practice. In the case of problem #16, for example, the principal had concluded that the yard duty schedule which he had inherited from a previous principal was inadequate and would have to be changed. We might imagine that this problem could have been brought to the principal's attention by dissatisfied teachers or parents, or by a stream of student discipline referrals by teachers on yard duty, but in this case the principal in question declared that he had actually identified this problem through an analysis of the schedule itself. A similar process was involved in the case of problems #20 and #22.

The other notable source of problems listed under "Other" in Table 1 has to do with organizational changes, either emanating from adjustments to school system policy or practice (#19, #21), or the school itself (#23, #24--in this last case the problem concerned moving to a different school). Both the organizational change and the self-identified or initiated problems (#7, #16, #18, #20) can be thought of as constituting projects of one kind or another. In each case the principals concerned had identified (or been assigned) a problem that needed to be "worked on" or monitored over a possibly indeterminate period of time, rather than simply "fixed". But while most of the "Other" problems in Table 1 would appear to qualify as projects, some, perhaps many, of the STP problems might also be thought of as such. Problem #7 (the disappointing teacher) has already been identified as constituting a project, but problems #1, #5 and #9, for example, appear to involve potentially "messy" situations that will have to be worked on or with over a period of time. Even so, the distinction between "walk-in" problems-that-may-become-projects (all of which in this "sample" were STP problems) and self-initiated or assigned projects would seem to offer a promising, if not entirely tidy, basis for categorizing problems encountered by principals.

Difficult problems

Our principals were also asked to identify the most difficult problem that they had had to deal with. Capsule summaries of their responses are summarized in Table 2, organized by some of the problem characteristics discussed above. Once again this list conveys an immediate impression of the wide variety and range of problems dealt with by principals and once again it is evident that STP type problems predominate, although in this case teachers clearly emerge as the most frequent problem focus. In all, teachers were the prime concern in eleven (46%) of these most difficult problems, four of which involved teacher dismissals. Students were directly involved in two of these teacher focused problems (#1 & #7), other teachers were directly involved in two (#3 & #8) and parents in one (#2).

Principals were specifically asked to identify the factors which made these problems so difficult. In eight of the teacher cases, emotional aspects emerged as a major factor. With regard to one of the dismissal cases, for example, the principal said that "it hurt to destroy [that teacher's] life", but, as he explained, it was a "no-win" situation and there was really no choice. The "no-win" characteristic was also mentioned in two of the other cases, but could logically be expected to have been a factor in others. Other factors that were mentioned as difficult aspects in some of these cases were the relatively long periods of time involved and "personal conflicts and attacks". Two principals held themselves at least partly responsible for some of the difficulties in these cases. In one instance, a principal declared that he had "had trouble being tough because I wanted to be liked", while in the other the principal simply declared that he had "handled it badly".

Of the four problems grouped under the "Other STP" heading, two focused on students, but in each case the interview data make it clear that the problems directly involved other students and teachers. With regard to the behavioural

student referred to in problem #12, the principal pointed out that it was the large number of different people and factors involved which made the problem so difficult, particularly "staff and student perceptions, community reaction [and the] mother's reaction to the school". The difficult aspect of the child abuse case, however, was "that the situation was not in my hands". As the principal explained, the situation was turned over to a "slow-moving" outside agency and he could do nothing except watch, feel helpless, and then clean-up the aftermath as best he could. The behavioural student and child abuse problems in Table 2, it should be noted, were not the same cases as those mentioned in Table 1.

The two remaining STP cases both involved parents. In the first of these (#14) the principal found himself defending one of the members of his staff (as was the case in problem #2, which again raises the question of accurate classification) against a campaign of criticism launched by a group of parents. The second of these problems (#15) was considerably more complex and escalated into a conflict between "staff and community with me [the principal] in the middle", the polarization of actors and issues being the factors identified as making this case difficult.

Conflicts between principals and others, particularly teachers, are clearly a major common factor in most of the STP problems listed in Table 2. Conflict was also a major element in two of the other most difficult problems described by principals, but as neither of these directly involved students, teachers or parents, they have been grouped under the "Other Conflicts" heading in Table 2. One of these problems involved a "personality clash" between the respondent, who was then a vice-principal, and his then principal. This problem could have been excluded from consideration on the ground that it was not experienced while the respondent was a principal, but it has been retained because it complements the other conflict problem reported, which was between the principal concerned and a superintendent.

Thus, both of these most difficult problems concerned conflicts between administrators of different rank, one involving what was described as a personality clash and the other a difference in "beliefs and motives".

The remaining seven "most difficult" problems have been classified in Table 2 as Projects. Problem #23, coping with the consequences of a major fire, is probably mis-classified and might be better regarded as a crisis management situation, an example of the ultimate walk-in type of problem. Despite being forced on the principal concerned by circumstances rather than being discovered or assigned, this situation nonetheless embodied some of the characteristics of a project, especially insofar as it had to be worked on and through over an extended period of time. The other problems which have been classified as projects are more clearly such. Each was described as concerning an entire school, and the completion of each project involved dealing with a host of subsidiary but related problems over a period of time. In each case the principal concerned had either personally identified the need for a major change and then committed himself to trying to accomplish this, or had had the need for change thrust upon him as the result of a new assignment or some other re-alignment of circumstances.

No relationships were evident between the nature of the most difficult problems identified by our interviewees and experience, more and less experienced principals being distributed roughly evenly within each of the four groups and sub-groups of problems shown in Table 2. An interesting pattern emerged with regard to our independent measure of problem solving ability, however, with four of the five principals who scored highest on this measure identifying problems which were classified as projects in Table 2, but only one of the five lowest scoring principals volunteering a project as their most difficult problem.

Most satisfying solution to a problem.

Table 3 lists the problems that gave rise to the most satisfying solutions that our principals could recall. This Table lists only 22 rather than 24 problems, the responses from two principals being unclear in the interview notes.[2] These 22 problems have been classified as either STP problems or projects. The "MDP #x" code in the problem summaries refers to Most Difficult Problem #x in Table 2. Thus, in the case of the first problem shown in Table 3, the principal concerned identified his most satisfying solution as being the one that he found for his previously identified most difficult problem as shown in Table 2, where that problem was listed as number 1. To aid interpretation, the MDP designations in Table 3 are also followed by a brief description of the relevant most difficult problem within parentheses.

Viewed in the context of patterns that emerged in the previous Tables, the most immediately notable feature of Table 3 is the relative paucity of STP problems. Further, the six STP problems listed in Table 3 are not dominated specifically by teacher, or for that matter student or parent, concerns, but instead tend to be problems in which two or three of these role-players were directly involved. This is particularly evident in the case of problem #5, where the principal made a specific reference to a "win-win" solution involving student, teacher and parent. The other notable feature about these STP problems--as might be expected--is that they all had happy endings.

The corollary of the relatively few STP problems is the high proportion of projects associated with satisfying solutions. By this token it would seem that working with and on projects is a far more satisfying form of principal problem solving than dealing with the more frequently encountered walk-in problems. While only two of the 15 STP problems (13%) listed as most difficult problems [MDPs] in Table 2 appear again in Table 3 as problems yielding most satisfying solutions, four

of the seven MDPs originally classified as projects (57%) appear again as problems associated with most satisfying solutions. Further, one of the STP problems offered as a MDP in Table 2 (#8) appears as a Project in Table 3. This interesting transmutation illustrates how a problem can acquire a quite different complexion when viewed from the other side, as it were. When the principal concerned described this situation as his most difficult problem, he stressed the conflictual elements involved, the "personal conflicts, unpleasantness, insidious campaigning" and so forth. When he was reflecting on the most satisfying solution he could remember, he mused "the same thing, really" and then went on to reflect on how he had gone about making necessary staff changes and "turning the climate around".

Whether his solution to what was previously described as a conflictual problem qualifies to be recognized as a project could, however, be considered debatable. Indeed, we are not sure ourselves about the characteristics and criteria that might reliably distinguish what we are recognizing here as projects from other problem situations, and it could well be the case that some--perhaps many--of the 16 projects listed in Table 3 would not be identified as such by other analysts. In the case of the problem under discussion (#16 in Table 3), we were encouraged to classify it as a project on the grounds that the principal described a sequence of interrelated steps and activities which culminated in what he clearly thought of as a notable and satisfying outcome for the school as a whole. As noted above, this outcome was described as "turning the climate around", and we were particularly struck by the frequency with which "turning around", "getting on track" and other transformational images were used by principals when describing worthwhile accomplishments resulting from what we interpreted as projects. In this sense, then, we tended to associate projects with problem solving endeavours which were aimed at working a substantial change in the school as a whole.

Not all of the projects listed in Table 3 were identified on this basis, some being much narrower in scope, but not necessarily less worthwhile. The problem activity identified as "salvaging a teacher" (#13) is a case in point. In this instance the principal explained that he "took on a young man no one wanted--he was written off", and then helped him become a good teacher by taking "five years to bring him up to a high level". This case provides a good illustration of the kind of long time commitment that we also recognized as a potential identifying characteristic of projects, as well as the high degree of personal commitment to the process which also often appears characteristic.

One other feature of some projects listed in Table 3 is the air of triumph that they bear with them, a characteristic which implicitly acknowledges the difficulty and challenge of the problem being dealt with. There was a palpable element of the heroic in the ways in which some principals recounted their success with these projects. The innocuous-seeming "school boundary change" project (#20) is a case in point. This was a far more complex problem than the description implies, the principal concerned being involved in promoting the construction of a new school which would replace several older community schools which, naturally, were to be closed. "We succeeded without anyone getting upset", said the principal, and then pointed out, with some glee, that the co-terminous separate school board had failed to implement a similar plan. Yet at the same time not all projects are crowned with success, and those that fail to achieve the hoped for culmination may still be worthwhile, even satisfying. The principal who launched Project #9 in Table 3, for example, explained that he and his staff were unable to achieve their objective; nevertheless, he proudly described this project as his most satisfying solution to a problem.

No notable relationships or differences were evident between experience and

the pattern of responses summarized in Table 3, nor was there a clear relationship with rated problem solving ability. A greater number of more experienced principals identified projects as providing their most satisfying solutions, but this could quite simply be explained by the greater opportunities for carrying projects through that are logically endowed by greater experience. On the basis of clues in the data and the relationship between rated problem solving ability and the tendency to identify projects as most difficult problems in Table 2, we suspect that better problem solvers may well tend to launch or otherwise become involved in a greater number of projects, but our data does not allow us to explore this possibility, which will have to await future attention.

Conclusion

The analysis reported here concentrated on only a portion of the extensive interview data collected in this study. Because the data collection method was so different from the original work by Leithwood et al., this study provided a useful opportunity to cross-check those findings. Our results, by and large, complement and confirm those findings. However, a comparison between our results and those of Leithwood et al. does raise the question of semantics and classification. The `routine' designation, which was intentionally created by Leithwood et al. to provide a category in which to collect predictable and commonplace problems, did not apparently have the same meaning for our principals. The difficulty may reside purely in the individual's perception of the meaning of `routine'. Most notably, our principals seem to have understood `routine' as applying to day-to-day operations, and thus not problems at all; only when day-to-day `routines' are disrupted by snags of one kind or another do they become problems and hence cease to be `routine'. Our principals did not perceive problems involving teachers, as opposed

to predictable, ordinary administrative procedures with and on behalf of teachers, as routine.

One of the major difficulties in distinguishing between and classifying administrative problems is interconnectedness. The list of problem categories presented to our principals classified students, teachers and parents separately, but our principals were often unwilling to make that separation. For our principals, students and/or teachers and/or parents often constituted a global category of problems which could not be easily isolated. Clearly, every categorization system must suffer from a degree of artificiality in that there will always be leakage from one category to another. Nonetheless, in the principal's world, problems involving students must often necessarily involve parents and teachers, and it is hard to imagine any permutation of the three groups which would permit the isolation of any one. Serious consideration must be given to whether a categorization system which does attempt to isolate these areas is sacrificing accuracy in the interests of neatness.

In the course of interviewing 24 incumbent principals, we were able to collect an opportunity sample of 70 different administrative problems. The transcriptions of these problems could, at some future date, provide rich case material for further study. Preliminary analysis, however, has identified some interesting patterns. Experience in the principalship does not emerge as systematically affecting the way in which principals describe their perceptions of their problem solving world, except insofar as more experienced principals have more stories to tell. However, as with the earlier analysis of the quantitative measures, differences were observed between principals who were evaluated by our judges as responding well to the case study and those who were evaluated as responding poorly. Principals who were evaluated highly by our judges were more likely to identify as their most difficult problem

something which we came to classify as a project. Furthermore, projects were more often cited by all principals as being particularly satisfying in their resolution. This would seem to imply that principals derive more satisfaction from dealing with longer-term and broader-range problems which require planning and organization than they do from dealing with the problems which walk in to their awareness every day. The walk-in problems appear to most frequently involve permutations of the student and/or teacher and/or parent grouping observed above, while problems which became projects more frequently involved a reorganization of some kind with, inevitably, a strong focus on curriculum and program provision rather than the predicaments of individuals. There may also be an implication that principals who are better at problem solving (at least as we have measured it here) tend to look for or, at least launch, projects more often than others. This is not to imply that they attach more importance to the projects than they do to STP problems; indeed, that would be absolutely contrary to what they told us. It may be that more able principals feel more competent in dealing with the STP type of problem than their colleagues and thus do not find these problems as difficult; it may be that they are more likely to identify a major school-wide problem as being the root of many STP problems; it may be that they see reorganization as a way to avoid many future STP problems.

Our data do seem to indicate that the problem solving world of the principal could be conceptualized as encompassing four broad types: routine, predictable administrative procedures; walk-in student and/or teacher and/or parent concerns; other walk-in problems; and long-range projects of various kinds which often revolve around curriculum, program and school organization.

One of the apparent characteristics of projects, or at least the kind initiated by principals as a way of dealing with a problem, would appear to be a personal

commitment to the achievement of some imagined ideal. Other words which would fit here would be "vision" and "transformation", words which, although a little cliched, are central to current concepts of leadership. Being able to detect or otherwise diagnose a fundamental weakness in a school from a welter of walk-in problems and other clues and then being able to turn that root problem into a project may thus be a key facet of leadership, or is it just good administration? Regardless, there are many attractive research opportunities yet to be explored in the problem solving world of the principal.

ENDNOTES

1. To avoid inadvertently identifying either of the 2 women principals who participated in the study the male pronoun will be used in all examples taken from the raw data.

2. These missing responses are available in the archive interview tapes, but these, unfortunately, were not immediately available to us when this stage of the analysis was being conducted.

References

Allison, D.J. & P. Nagy. (1990, June). A study of principal problem solving: An introduction to the study. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Victoria.

Leithwood, K.A., B.J. Cousins & M.G.R. Smith. (1989, June). A description of the principal's world from a problem solving perspective. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Quebec City.

CATEGORIES OF PROBLEMS

(Listed alphabetically)

Least frequently encountered problems (percentages) (N=35)		Most frequently encountered problems (percentages) (N=52)
6%	Community at large	2%
34%	Ministry of Education	
	Non-teaching staff	2%
14%	Other principals	
11%	Outside agencies	
	Parents	11%
	Plant	2%
	School routines	11%
3%	Senior administration	2%
	Special events	2%
	Students	42%
	Teachers	25%
20%	Trustees	
9%	Vice-principal(s)	
	None predominate	2%
3%	No response	

FIGURE 1
MOST FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED AND LEAST FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED PROBLEMS

CATEGORIES OF PROBLEMS

(Listed alphabetically)

Most time consuming problems (percentages) (N=35)		Most important problems (percentages) (N=53)
6%	Community at large	9%
3%	Ministry of Education	
	Non-teaching staff	
	Other principals	
3%	Outside agencies	2%
17%	Parents	19%
3%	Plant	4%
6%	School routines	2%
	Senior administration	2%
3%	Special events	
49%	Students	34%
9%	Teachers	23%
	Trustees	
	Vice-principal(s)	
3%	Curriculum	2%
	Student learning	2%
	No response	2%

FIGURE 2
MOST TIME CONSUMING AND MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

CATEGORIES OF PROBLEMS

(Listed alphabetically)

Most routine problems (percentages) (N=41)		Most difficult problems (percentages) (N=34)
	Community at large	9%
	Ministry of Education	
	Non-teaching staff	
2%	Other principals	
	Outside agencies	3%
5%	Parents	38%
17%	Plant	
42%	School routines	3%
5%	Senior administration	
7%	Special events	
7%	Students	18%
2%	Teachers	21%
2%	Trustees	
	Vice-principal(s)	
2%	Different response	9%
2%	No response	

FIGURE 3
MOST ROUTINE AND MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEMS

TABLE 1
RECENT SPECIFIC PROBLEMS VOLUNTEERED BY INTERVIEWEES

"STP" Problems
1. Serious student discipline problem.
2. Student complaints about a teacher.
3. A special education placement problem.
4. Child abuse by parent.
5. Inappropriate instructional behaviour and attitude by teacher.
6. Accommodating a recently mainstreamed behavioural student.
7. Disappointing performance by a newly appointed teacher.
8. Parental complaint about student behaviour.
9. Ineffective teacher.
10. Parental complaints about teacher.
11. Parental pressure concerning access to special program.
12. Teacher demand for preferential library time.
13. Apple juice donated by parent.
14. Routine student discipline problem.
15. Student behaviour problems related to medication.
Other
16. Yard duty schedule.
17. Absent crossing guard.
18. Developing new discipline policy for school.
19. Implementing new special education policy.
20. Garbage in school yard.
21. Major organizational change.
22. Cost of recreation program.
23. Reorganization due to inaccurate enrolment projections.
24. Developing entry plan for new school.

TABLE 2
MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY PRINCIPALS

"STP" Problems
Teachers
1. Teacher losing control of class with behavioural students.
2. Teacher unjustly accused on racism by parents.
3. Conflict with staff in new school.
4. Confrontation with consistently tardy teacher.
5. "Ending a teacher's career."
6. Discussing a probationary teacher.
7. Students sexually harassing a teacher.
8. Conflict with members of staff.
9. Dismissal of previously competent teacher with health problems.
10. Dismissing three teachers in one year.
11. Working with mentally ill teacher.
Other STP
12. Student with severe behavioural problem.
13. Child abuse case.
14. Conflict with parent over teacher.
15. Parent-school conflict over perceived inequities in split classes.
Other conflicts
16. Personality clash with principal when vice principals.
17. Conflict with superintendent over special education policy.
Projects
18. School reorganization following enrolment decline.
19. Attempted school reorganization to provide smaller primary classes.
20. Reorganization of new school.
21. "Getting a school back on track."
22. "Establishing myself and turning a school around."
23. Dealing with aftermath of a school fire.
24. Taking over a new school under traumatic circumstances.

TABLE 3
PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH MOST SATISFYING SOLUTIONS

STP
1. Solving MDP#1 (teacher problem with behavioural students)
2. Changing program for autistic child and watching him benefit.
3. Helping a problem student stay in school.
4. Parental support for a discipline problem.
5. Student, teacher and parent in deteriorating relationship - found win-win solution.
6. Solving MDP#14 (parent conflict re. teacher).
Projects
7. Solving MDP#18 (school reorganization).
8. Developing new report card with staff.
9. Solving MDP#19 (attempted reorganization).
10. Solving MDP#20 (reorganization of new school).
11. Solving MDP#21 (getting school back on track).
12. Salvaging a teacher no one wanted.
13. Changing the language program in the school.
14. Building bridges to private schools.
15. Implementing whole language program across the school.
16. Turning climate of school around (previous MDP#8)
17. Solving head lice program and sharing knowledge with other schools.
18. Program reorganization of TMR classes.
19. Implementation of remedial reading program.
20. School boundary change.
21. Turning a school around.
22. Turning previous school around.